Disability Representations and Portrayals in Picture Books With the Coretta Scott King Award

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Abstract

This study analyzed how people with disabilities are portrayed in picture books with the Coretta Scott King Award (CSKA) to address the intersectionality of African/African American racial identity and disabilities. Disability critical race theory was foundational for this study. The pool of 134 picture books that received the CSKA from 1971 to 2020 was used as the data for the systematic content analysis. For analysis, the researchers utilized a qualitative approach that guided axial coding and selective coding in looking for emerging themes. They found that 13 picture books portrayed African/African American characters with disabilities. The majority of these books did not necessarily emphasize the disabilities of these characters. When focusing on other dimensions of identity such as gender, age, disability type, and so on, the researchers found underrepresentation, invisibility, and marginalization issues, which led them to discussions of power relations. This study calls for future studies that can discover more portrayals of African/African American people with disabilities and that can deepen scholarly discussions about their representation in children’s literature.

Keywords: Coretta Scott King Awards, DisCrit, disability portrayal, picture book, African American

The Coretta Scott King Award (CSKA) is presented annually to exceptional African American authors and illustrators of children’s and young adult books that showcase an appreciation for African American culture and universal human values (Association for Library Service to Children, 2020). These books stand out for their depiction of Black experiences, whether in the United States or beyond. Consequently, CSKA books serve as mirrors, not just for African American children, but for Black children everywhere, aiding in the development of their identity and fostering a sense of belonging. These books also enhance reading comprehension by drawing on their familiar background knowledge (Robinson, 2020; Tatum & Muhammad, 2012).
Although the CSKA criteria do not explicitly demand the portrayal of disabilities, an examination of how African/African American cultures and identities intersect with disabilities in the CSKA picture books can lead us to discover high-quality picture books that are valuable in educational settings. These books can serve as both mirrors and windows, allowing children to connect their identities and culture with the stories (Sims Bishop, 1990). Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore how African/African American individuals with disabilities are represented in picture books that have received the CSKA. We applied disability critical race theory (DisCrit; Annamma et al., 2018) to guide our focus on the intersectionality of race/ethnicity and disabilities in the analysis of characters, narratives, and illustrations.

In 2021, 14% of the African American population self-reported having disabilities, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (Leppert & Schaeffer, 2023). It is essential to examine children’s books that are both about and for African American children with disabilities, with a particular focus on the intersection of race and disability.

The intersection of race and disability has a long history fraught with underlying issues of racism. Jordan (2005) discovered that African Americans not only have a higher representation in special education but are also often assigned more stigmatizing disability labels, such as intellectual disabilities and learning disabilities. Additionally, Black children are more likely to be labeled with emotional disturbance due to disruptive behavior in classrooms (Mandell et al., 2008).

Some progress has been noted. Zhang et al. (2014), in their analysis of national data from 2004 to 2008, found a significant decrease in the number of African American children with intellectual disabilities. More recently, Morgan et al. (2017) investigated the overrepresentation of Black children in special education through a systematic review of statistical studies that included at least one covariate. They reported numerical estimates of disproportionate representations between Black and White students. However, their findings only moderately supported the idea of misidentification of disabilities among Black children. Instead, they concluded that Black children are less likely to receive special education services compared to White peers with similar traits. Nevertheless, the debate regarding over/underrepresentation or mis/identification of Black children’s disabilities continues.

Cavendish et al. (2020) proposed a more respectful consideration of different perspectives than those traditionally employed in special education research to address this debate. They argued that traditional special education research has been insufficient in reducing overrepresentation, largely because it has historically centered whiteness as the norm when addressing overrepresentation. Cavendish et al. discussed the claims made by Morgan et al. (2015) regarding underrepresentation of Black children in special education, suggesting that the significant number of White children categorized as overrepresented can be reversed if whiteness is decentered.

These issues in special education are rarely addressed in children’s picture books or in literature related to children’s picture books. Furthermore, when it comes to the representation of Africans or African Americans in children’s literature in general, there is a significant lack of content or characters from these backgrounds (Koss et al., 2018;
Robinson, 2020; Wood & Jocius, 2013). For instance, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center’s 2020 report, which was based on 2019 statistics, revealed that only 12.2% of the examined children’s books included African or African American content or characters. This underrepresentation issue extends to Black characters with disabilities in children’s books (Davis et al., 2021; Farias, 2018).

What’s even more problematic is that among children’s books featuring Black representation in the Cooperative Children’s Book Center’s (2020) report, only 5.7% were written by African or African American authors. It is reasonable to assume that there is an even smaller number of children’s books authored by African or African American individuals with disabilities, although the report from the Cooperative Children’s Book Center did not specify this. This situation could potentially contribute to the issue of misrepresentation.

In general, there is limited knowledge about how people with disabilities are portrayed in books that win the CSKA, which is the only award that specifically targets Black children’s literature in the United States. Consequently, this study focused on the CSKA picture books to investigate representation issues concerning African or African American people with disabilities. Although our deliberate choice to focus on CSKA books offered some convenience in terms of selection and screening, we acknowledge that many other picture books not included in the CSKA may successfully portray African or African American people with disabilities.

In the next section, we examine the current literature concerning the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of African or African American individuals with disabilities in picture books. This review helps establish a context for the issue.

Subsequently, in the following sections, we present our findings and discuss the CSKA picture books that depict African or African American characters with disabilities. We also describe the analysis methods employed in our study.

**Review of Research**

This literature review addresses the historical concern of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of African or African American children with disabilities in children’s literature. It highlights the challenges faced by young readers in finding authentic and meaningful depictions of characters who share their experiences. The lack of diverse narratives in this demographic not only affects those directly involved but also impacts society’s comprehension of diversity and inclusivity. The review investigates the extent of these issues and sets the stage for the current study, which focused on the representation and portrayal of African/African American children with disabilities in CSKA picture books.

**Underrepresentation**

Relatively few picture books portray people with disabilities compared to the number of chapter books (Prater, 2003; Saunders, 2004). A similar trend is observed in the body of scholarly literature. Some existing scholarly literature about disability por-
trayals in picture books discovered underrepresentation issues. For instance, Dyches et al. (2006) found a disproportionality between the percentage of characters with disabilities in Caldecott picture books (4%) and the percentage of actual students with disabilities in U.S. public schools (12%). Moreover, the composition of the types of disabilities did not match between Caldecott picture books and U.S. students with disabilities: Orthopedic impairments, autism, intellectual disabilities, and visual impairments were major types in Caldecott picture books. Speech/language impairments, a frequently observed disability type in U.S. public schools, were not represented in Caldecott picture books. Martinez et al.’s (2016) analysis, which included more recent Caldecott picture books, found a similar trend with physical disabilities as the most frequently observed type. The findings from the most recent study (Meacham, 2021; Meacham et al., 2022) that analyzed the intersectionality of LatinX racial identities and disabilities in picture books with the Américas Book Award were not divergent from Dyches et al. or Martinez et al. In that study, orthopedic impairment was the most frequently portrayed type in a very small pool of characters with disabilities in the Américas Book Award picture books.

Regarding races, until 10 years ago, White characters with disabilities were overrepresented in books that won the Newbery Medal (Leininger et al., 2010). A more recent analysis of Newbery books from 1929 to 2019 found that “a larger portion of the non-White characters appear to be written as disabled compared to the portion of White main characters written as people with disabilities” (Koss & Paciga, 2020, p. 17); the study, however, did not find any Black main characters with disabilities in Newbery books.

Issues of Black representation in children’s literature are related to underrepresentation, stereotyping, and misrepresentation of image, character, and intelligence (Farias, 2018). And these issues are interconnected. Because the number of African/African American characters in children’s books is low, it is hard to find diversity of identities among African/African American people in terms of gender, socioeconomic status, jobs, religious background, urban/rural setting, and disabilities. For instance, although Davis et al.’s (2021) most recent research on Black representation in the 115 Caldecott books from 1995 to 2020 found a slightly higher percentage of books with Black representation (15.7%) than the Cooperative Children’s Book Center’s (2020) report, Black males were still underrepresented in those Caldecott books. In addition, representation of jobs of African/African American people is quite limited in children’s books. Many books feature Black characters focusing on the same topics such as “slavery, civil rights, famous athletes, iconic musicians, and famous firsts” (Davis et al., 2021, p. 13), so today’s African/African American people’s lived experiences with their diverse occupations are barely depicted. There is also a threat of stereotyping, as many children’s books with African/African American characters deal with challenges of so-called ghetto life (Davis et al., 2021; Hammond, 2016). This trend relates to issues of misrepresentation of African/African American people in children’s literature.

**Misrepresentation**

It can be a daunting task to deal with the topic of disability in picture books, as they need to consider developmental appropriateness (Appleyard, 1991), in assisting young readers’ understanding of disability (Daniels, 2004) through appealing language
and illustrations (Brittain, 2004). In addition to a disability perspective, portraying the language and images of African/African American people with disabilities matching their culture to provide authentic and realistic picture books (Robinson, 2020) is essential, although it is not an undemanding charge to authors and illustrators.

Scholars have pointed out common issues in portraying characters with disabilities in children’s literature: negative or positive stereotyping, lack of realism and accuracy in the portrayal of the disabilities, lack of own voices of characters with disabilities (Brittain, 2004; Kendrick, 2004), and othering people with disabilities by placing unnecessary emphasis on differences from people without disabilities (Blaska, 2004; Solis, 2004). Characters with disabilities are often portrayed as outsiders, not as a protagonist but as an instrument to assist readers with understanding disabilities (Brittain, 2004; Kendrick, 2004). Poor quality in text and illustrations is problematic in any picture books. Picture books with disability portrayals with poor quality in text and illustrations, however, often display problems of quasi-fiction, which focuses on factual information about the disability or difficulty of characters without a plot (Brittain, 2004; Quicke, 1985; Saunders, 2004). In some quasi-fiction books like *I Have a Sister—My Sister Is Deaf* by Peterson (1977), the characters with disabilities do not even have names (Brittain, 2004). Even some novels, in which readers may expect some more textual elaboration than in picture books, display a similar problem. For example, in an African American children’s novel titled *Listen for the Fig*, even though the blind character has his name Uncle Shamus, he is often referred to as the blind man (Daniels, 2004). In addition, inability to participate in the same activities as the rest of society tend to be unduly emphasized regardless of technological advances and adjustments that enable full participation of people with disabilities (Daniels, 2004; Marks, 1999).

In terms of illustrations, some scholars problematize soft-toned, bland, and colorless illustrations in portraying characters with disabilities (Brittain, 2004). The characters’ points of view in the illustrations also can matter. Portraying a character with disability facing sideways rather than looking directly at the reader is criticized. These illustrations may un/intentionally reduce the power of the characters with disabilities and reinforce their marginal status in society, although they may make disabilities more approachable or accessible to readers without disabilities. Because fun aspects of picture books are significant for readers in early childhood (Appleyard, 1991), however, bland and colorless illustrations can lose readers’ attention, which may cause even more marginalization of people with disabilities (Brittain, 2004).

Scholars have developed criteria for authentic representation of people with disabilities in picture books and children’s literature (e.g., Adomat, 2014; Blaska, 2004; Dyches & Prater, 2000; Gervay, 2004; Pehrson, 2011). The Schneider Family Book Award, which is “given annually to recognize and honor books for their distinguished portrayal of people living with a disabling condition” (American Library Association, 2014, p. 5), also provides selection criteria. Those criteria share many common aspects.

Those criteria look for realistic and accurate portrayals of characters with disabilities. The character should be developed focusing on the person rather than on their disabilities or on (miraculous) cures. Characters with disabilities in the past used to be portrayed superficially as superhuman or subhuman, different from people without
disabilities. Rather than focusing on differences, the criteria call for emphasis on similarities between people with disabilities and those without disabilities in terms of interests, social interactions, and personalities so that readers can develop empathy. These criteria promote successful stories of people with disabilities, but too much focus on unrealistic success stories may create unintended stereotypes (e.g., to be fully accepted in the society/community, people with disabilities need to be overly successful, like superheroes). To avoid these pitfalls, struggles, and/or conflicts not from disabilities but from everyday lives similar to people without disabilities can be an important source for the story and the plot. “The notion that people can compensate for their disability by overdeveloping other senses is in keeping with conventional ways of looking at disability” (Adomat, 2014, “Idealization of Differences” section, para. 4). Rather than focusing on overly developed auditory and/or olfactory senses of blind people, rich descriptions of their everyday lives that are similar to hearing people are encouraged. When characters with disabilities are depicted as multifaceted human beings, young readers can make many personal connections, as seen in Adomat’s (2014) study about children’s exploration of issues of disability during read-alouds and literature circle discussions: “My mom sometimes holds my hand when I go to the clinic. She gets upset when I get late, like Jason” (“Focus on the Person” section, table).

Inclusion, acceptance, and civic participation of characters with disabilities in the society/community should be depicted. Own voices of characters with disabilities should be heard through the story, which requires their roles of protagonists and/or narrators. Not only services or care that they receive regarding their disabilities but also their social contributions or care that they provide to others should be important parts of the story.

In general, many criteria for quality in story development and illustrations required for any children’s literature are applicable to books with characters with disabilities. In many quasi-fiction books that focus on explaining disabilities, character development, point of view, and plot are underdeveloped. Again, rather than focusing on disabilities, the person and their lived experiences should be main in the story. Illustrations and text need to meet the above criteria. Furthermore, illustrations need to enhance the text with artistic expressions using color, line, shape, rhythm, texture, layout, and design, which also should be developmentally appropriate and appealing to young readers.

Scholars have problematized the negative stereotyping about African/African American people with disabilities (Daniels, 2004; Yenika-Agbaw, 2011). Yenika-Agbaw (2011) discussed how Black characters with disabilities were portrayed in seven randomly selected adolescent novels. Of these seven novels, four were set in Africa or were about Africans, and three were about African Americans. She found that the novels set in Africa or about Africans “construct disability as unnatural” (p. 216) and connect it to myth-based traditions. A disability is portrayed as difficult to reverse without a miraculous cure. The African American novels, on the other hand, exhibit a more scientifically informed understanding of disability. They tend to describe the details of the lived experiences of the characters with a disability, revealing injustices in their environments. Meanwhile, Daniels (2004) found that some African American children’s literature stereotyped people with disabilities by stressing heroism and cure. As disabilities are considered to be an additional source of stigmatization to the racially oppressed African American community (Cohen, 1999), their members with disabilities needed to prove their contribution to the extreme in order to become a fully accepted member of the community, which is
reflected in children’s literature. Some books portray African American characters with disabilities marginalized even when the disability conditions are eliminated (Daniels, 2004). Regarding African/African American people’s learning, texts and illustrations frequently frame it from a deficit perspective (Robinson, 2020).

We were unable to find any literature about cultural specificity of African/African American children’s literature with characters with disabilities. Since Sims Bishop (1982) problematized acultural, or culturally neutral, children’s literature with people from racial minorities, multicultural children’s literature scholars have promoted culturally specific books that portray “the unique experience of nonwhite cultural groups … such as lifestyle, linguistic traits, religious beliefs, family relationships, social mores, attitudes, values, and behaviors … and may also deal with issues of racism, discrimination and oppression” (Cai, 2002, p. 23). For instance, a well-known classic picture book that features a Black child has been “widely criticized for not being culturally specific” (Horning, 2016, para. 3) among children’s literature scholarship. However, the same book is celebrated in terms of disability portrayals:

Keats’ work was acclaimed as a trailblazer for his use of a Black child as the main protagonist, but the child’s colour was not the point of the story, and neither would be his disability, if he had one. Peter might have been deaf or have autism. This story is about children’s joy, no matter what their race, gender or disability. (Worotynec, 2004, para. 15)

There can be children’s books that identify the characters with disabilities not culturally but racially (c.f., a child with black skin color in the illustration using a wheelchair, while no cultural specificity depicted). Without depiction of specifics of African/African American culture, such as names, lifestyle, religion, family structure/relationships, values, behaviors, and linguistic traits, those books will be culturally neutral books that dissolve cultural identities and prevent the understanding of different cultures, which is “detrimental to the culturally diverse society” (Cai, 2002, p. 25).

We still know little about how African American children with disabilities are portrayed in U.S. picture books. Although the CSKA is one of the most famous awards for literature for and about African/African American children in the United States, there is a relatively small body of professional content analyses of CSKA books (e.g., Marshall, 2008; Parsons & Castleman, 2011). A seminal work by Parsons and Castleman (2011) focused on how the American dream is portrayed in CSKA-winning books from 2000 to 2009, as “the Coretta Scott King Award Titles promote understanding and appreciation of the culture of all peoples and their contribution to the realization of the American dream of a pluralistic society” (American Library Association, 2024, para. 2). Parsons and Castleman found six salient themes of the American dream as envisioned by characters in CSKA books: mobility, achievement, selfhood, family, remaining a child, and promoting social justice. Meanwhile, no scholarly content analyses have focused on disabilities in the corpus of picture books that have won the CSKA. In this article, therefore, we explore the portrayals of Africans/African Americans with disabilities in picture books that have won the Coretta Scott King Award. The following questions guided our analysis:

1. Which picture books that have won the CSKA represent and portray characters with disabilities?
2. How are disabilities represented and portrayed in the picture books that have won the CSKA?

3. How are the identities of the African/African American characters with disabilities represented and portrayed in the picture books that have won the CSKA?

The following sections discuss the theoretical framework and the methods of this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

Our study is grounded in disability critical race theory (DisCrit), which focuses on the intersection of race and disability, providing insight into the experiences of individuals with dual racial and disability identities. In our research on the representation and portrayal of African/African American children with disabilities in CSKA picture books, DisCrit’s principles are central, guiding our examination of how race and disability influence the narratives and characters in these books.

**DisCrit**

Disability studies is an interdisciplinary field that is a response to the medical model of disability that constructs disability as a category and source of disadvantage and deficit that needs to be corrected by medical procedures. Disability studies emerged from and in tandem with social justice movements initiated by disabled people that emphasized the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2010), which promoted a collective political consciousness and inclusion among disabled people. Disability categorization was viewed as a source of social oppression and discrimination. Notwithstanding the liberatory intent of disability studies, according to Bell (2006), because White scholars established disability studies, White subjects were predominant in films and documentaries about disability. To address this discrepancy, scholars began to engage disability studies with critical race theory (Erevelles et al., 2006; Petersen, 2009). However, as critical race theory scholarship assumed categorization of people with disabilities that was incompatible with disability studies (Erevelles & Minear, 2010), DisCrit emerged as a way of formally bringing disability studies and critical race theory together. DisCrit is a lens particularly suited for studying children’s books because of how it embraces the multiple and intersecting identities of disabled people without falling into the tropes of binaries and categorizations. Students reading picture books in school will more likely see themselves in their multifaceted and intersecting realities instead of the essentializing and categorizing perspectives that preceded DisCrit.

**Tenets of DisCrit**

DisCrit’s critical lens is discussed in terms of seven tenets (Annamma et al., 2018). Historically, disability and race have been seen as interconnected by people who considered people of color to be less intelligent than White people, in terms of genetic determinism (Gillborn, 2016; Valencia, 1997). Therefore, DisCrit Tenet 1 critically looks at how racism and ableism are interconnected. Tenet 2 critically examines not only race
and disability, but also class, gender, sexuality, and other various dimensions of identities and troubles. In Tenet 3, social constructions and psychological impacts of racial/ableist labels are recognized and emphasized. Because DisCrit focuses particularly on how those with these labels are marginalized in society, it privileges voices of those marginalized in Tenet 4, and DisCrit research has used designs that facilitate their participation and authoring. Tenet 5 looks at legal aspects of disability and race and discovers how the rights of some groups based on racist or ableist views were abridged or annihilated. Tenet 6 points out that whiteness and ability/SMARTNESS are properties and that whiteness needs to be associated with smartness for the smartness to be considered as goodness: “White boys’ misbehavior is met with a ‘boys will be boys’ attitude, while Black boys are seen as menacing” (Annamma et al., 2018, p. 61) and problematic, which requires intervention in society. Again, whiteness and ability/SMARTNESS are unjustly constructed in society.

Last but not least, Tenet 7 emphasizes activism for social justice. Rather than staying in the theoretical realm, DisCrit facilitates resistant actions against normalizing, therefore oppressive, discourses in policies and practices.

In sum, DisCrit, in conjunction with the intersectionality perspective (Crenshaw, 1989), focuses on the multiple marginalizations of people of color with disabilities and seeks to document specific contexts and processes of how these people are marginalized, resisting educational inequities (Annamma et al., 2018). Particularly focusing on Tenet 2, we seek to understand various dimensions of identities and troubles such as class, gender, age, and health in addition to race and disability. In addition, Tenet 4 assisted us in seeking authentic voices of African/African American people with disabilities in picture books that won the CSKA.

With the assistance of the DisCrit framework, we look at how double marginalization of African/African American people disabilities is resisted or reinforced in picture books that won the CSKA, as Bell’s (2011) book “uncovers the misrepresentations of Black, disabled bodies and the missed opportunities to think about how those bodies transform(ed) systems and culture” (pp. 3–4). In addition, we approach disabilities with a sociocultural and sociopolitical lens rather than a medical lens. In lieu of focusing on what people with disabilities cannot do, we look into their cultures portrayed in the picture books. For example, a picture book that describes various aspects of deaf culture is considered to be a successful portrayal, compared to ones that focus solely on nonhearing aspects (Brittain, 2004).

Methods

In this section, we provide an overview of the methods employed in this study, with an emphasis on our positionality, the data sources we used, and our approach to data analysis. Positionality provides insights into researchers’ backgrounds and perspectives and how they may influence the study’s design and interpretation. We also outline our data sources, encompassing the CSKA picture books featuring African/African American children with disabilities, and describe our systematic approach to data analysis. This section serves as the foundation for understanding the methodological underpinnings of our research on the representation and portrayal of African/African American children with disabilities in CSKA picture books.
Our Positionality

We do not identify ourselves as people with disabilities in the traditional sense, meaning individuals who have a physical or mental impairment. Furthermore, we do not profess to comprehend the challenges that people with disabilities encounter. We do, however, recognize the difficulties of progression as a result of systemic constraints that are implemented. Collectively, we identify as scholars of color in a profession that is predominantly occupied by White male Americans without disabilities. As Black male, Black female, and Asian immigrant female academics, we individually bring our unique awareness of multiple marginalization to this research. Within the purview, we understand that the way in which we maneuver through academia can be different from people with disabilities. This involves utilizing our voices to elicit change, addressing microaggressions, and advocating against inequities regarding salary and opportunity. As scholars of color, we understand that marginalized groups (disabled people and people of color) have the potential of lacking growth mentally, academically, and professionally not caused by their identities or disabilities but by unjust oppression, stereotyping, and misrepresentation of them by hegemonic people. Regardless, we acknowledge and appreciate the civil participation and contribution of people from marginalized groups.

Data

We identified the entire pool of 134 picture books that received the CSKA for 50 years (1971–2020): from the beginning of this award to present. For the first screening of the books to select picture books that portray disabilities, we analyzed all 134 books using the following selection criteria. First, the picture books needed to be appropriate in terms of text reading levels for young children’s (Grades K–2) independent reading or adults’ read-alouds. The text reading levels were determined by our professional judgment using various online resources such as Lexile, Scholastic Book Wizard, and the recommendations of major online bookstores. Second, we looked for any portrayals of disabilities at primary, secondary, or tertiary levels in the text or illustrations. If tertiary characters with (potential) disabilities only appeared in illustrations, they were still included during screening. For instance, when they held canes that assisted them in walking, these characters were included for further analysis of disability portrayals. However, if it was apparent that their canes were used for other purposes, the picture books were omitted from the pool for further analysis. For instance, many characters in What A Morning! The Christmas Story were holding staffs for livestock, and Bill “Bojangles” Robinson in Rap a Tap Tap: Here’s Bojangles—Think of That! used a cane when dancing in his show. These characters were not considered to be disabled. Then we identified the characters’ disabilities as orthopedic, visual, emotional, and auditory, as seen in Table 1, which describes the 13 CSKA picture books with characters with disabilities. As we are cognizant that the 13 disability categories in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 were historically set by White norms, and therefore are inequitable (Beratan, 2006), we used different terms than the IDEA categories.
Table 1

Summaries, rationale for selection, and other information of all selected books for content analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Picture book title</th>
<th>CSKA award year</th>
<th>Author-created summaries</th>
<th>Rationale for selection</th>
<th>Reading level (age range)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Before She Was Harriet</em></td>
<td>Illustrator honor, 2018</td>
<td>This book opens with a description of Harriet during her latter years that detailed how life’s challenges had taken a toll on her body. Harriet’s life was full of hardships, but also determination and triumph. The author’s intent in beginning by describing her physical appearance was to provide the readers with a clear understanding that she was once strong both physically and mentally.</td>
<td>Because the text mentions that Harriet Tubman’s slave owner broke her back by whipping her, this book is included in the pool for the disability portrayal analysis after the first screening.</td>
<td>4–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>In Plain Sight</em></td>
<td>Illustrator honor, 2017</td>
<td>This book is about how Sophie and her grandfather spent their time at home every day after school. Her grandfather would ask her playfully to find things like a paper clip, a rubber band, or his favorite painting brush that he had lost throughout the day. In doing so, her grandfather let Sophie know about his morning. The book portrays how they bonded to one another through many interactions like this.</td>
<td>In terms of disability portrayal, Sophie’s grandfather sits in a wheelchair in several illustrations, although the text does not mention anything about a disability.</td>
<td>4–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Title</td>
<td>Illustrator Honor</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>Illustration Details</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Last Stop on Market Street</em></td>
<td>Illustrator honor, 2016</td>
<td><em>Last Stop on Market Street</em> deals with economic inequality portrayed in an urban U.S. context. The main storyline follows CJ’s bus rides with his grandmother. While deficit views and devaluation of the cultures of people in poverty are prevalent in society (e.g., they are lazy, something’s wrong with them), <em>Last Stop on Market Street</em> supports the counternarrative. The bus stop where CJ and his grandma get off is a soup kitchen where they volunteer weekly. They are not lazy. They are helping others.</td>
<td>This book portrays one blind man in the text and the illustration and two tertiary characters in their wheelchairs only in the illustrations.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ellen’s Broom</em></td>
<td>Illustrator honor, 2013</td>
<td>The focus of this book is the broom that hung on the wall in Ellen’s house as a symbol of her parents’ marriage. As church weddings had not been performed for African Americans during the days of slavery, their unofficial ceremony of jumping over the broom was the way they got married. After slavery was over, Ellen’s parents’ marriage was legalized at the courthouse in a family ceremony. They brought the broom decorated with flowers, and her parents jumped over it again.</td>
<td>In terms of disability portrayal, a tertiary character is holding a cane in an illustration.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Bird**

John Steptoe Award for New Talent, 2009

This book addresses the challenges a young boy faces after the deaths of his older brother and granddad. Bird, whose real name is Mehkai, narrates the story. Bird was given his nickname by his granddad when he was a baby because he would lie in his crib with his mouth open and cry like a baby bird. He lived with his parents, granddad, and brother until hard times struck their family. The passing of his big brother Marcus, and later his granddad, left Bird pondering the life lessons both of them had taught him as he strove to develop his talent. Inconsistent life decisions by Marcus had resulted in Bird having both good and bad memories of his big brother.

This book was selected for our disability-portrayal analysis because of Marcus's emotional disturbance related to drug addiction and depression.

7–10

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**Ellington Was Not a Street**

Illustrator winner, 2005

This book is a reflective tribute to a community of notable African American innovators including Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Du Bois, written by the African American poet Ntozake Shange. It describes her childhood, when many of them visited her home on Ellington Street. She wrote, “Our house was filled with all kinds of folk. Our windows were not cement or steel. Our doors opened like our daddy's arms held us safe and loved.” The illustrations depict gatherings of these thinkers in her home.

W. E. B. Du Bois is shown using a cane in an illustration, although his disability is not mentioned.

6–10
Ashley Bryan's ABC of African American Poetry

This alphabet book is different from traditional alphabet books. It is not designed to teach the alphabet. Rather, Ashley Bryan uses the alphabet as a sort of organizational tool for poems by significant African American poets. First he came up with the illustration for each poem. Then in the poem he capitalized “the alphabet letter wherever it occurred in those lines” (Bryan, 1997, Foreword).

The Singing Man: Adapted From a West African Folktale

This book was written based on a folktale about a young man from an African village near the city of Lagos who left his village to pursue his dreams. He encounters an elderly musician during his travels. It is customary for the young men to remain in the village and work; however, Banzar chooses a different path. He informs the villagers of his decision to become a musician following his manhood ceremony.

Regarding disability portrayals, there is Sholo, an elderly blind man who travels from place to place playing his drum for the village chiefs.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Illustrator Honor</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Talking Eggs</em></td>
<td>Illustrator honor</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>This book, based on a folktale, is about how a girl named Blanche became rich by being kind and following an old woman’s instructions. Blanche’s mother and older sister treat her badly, as Cinderella’s stepmother and stepsisters did. One day after she is severely reprimanded by them, she runs away into the woods, where she encounters the old woman. The old woman has magical powers. When Blanche follows all her instructions carefully, talking eggs turn into diamonds, rubies, gold, silver, and silk, making Blanche rich. When she goes back home, her mother sends Blanche’s sister Rose to the woods so that Rose can get rich too. Unfortunately for Rose, she gets in trouble because she does not follow the old woman’s instructions. This story qualifies as a CSKA book with a disability portrayal because the old woman uses a cane for walking.</td>
<td>4–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Under the Sunday Tree</em></td>
<td>Illustrator honor</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>This book of poetry contains Eloise Greenfield’s poems and Amos Ferguson’s artwork. In the illustration for a poem titled “That Kind of Day,” a woman and a man are holding canes, indicating orthopedic disabilities. The poem, however, does not mention disabilities or their canes.</td>
<td>4–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Illustrator</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Patchwork Quilt</td>
<td></td>
<td>Illustrator Award, 1986</td>
<td></td>
<td>This book is about Tanya’s grandma. Her quilt was made from scraps of old shirts, pants, and Halloween costumes, which made it meaningful to the family. Before Grandma can finish the quilt, though, she becomes sick. On the Christmas morning that Grandma gets sick, she can’t do the things that she normally does on Christmas morning, like make muffins and hot chocolate. When a week passed and Grandma is still sick, Tanya wants to help finish the quilt. Grandma teaches Tanya how to do it and supervises her. One June day Tanya is excited to see Grandma working on the quilt again. Grandma is eventually able to finish the quilt, and a note on the final piece reads, “For Tanya from your Mama and Grandma.” Grandma’s temporary illness enables this book to be included in the current analysis of disability portrayals in the CSKA picture books.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Have a Sister—My Sister Is Deaf</td>
<td></td>
<td>Author honor, 1979</td>
<td></td>
<td>The narrator of the story describes her little sister as being deaf. She juxtaposes the things that her sister can and can’t do. She can do and understand many things. She can play the piano, but she can’t sing along with what she is playing because she can’t hear the notes. She can climb and play on monkey bars, but she can’t hear her sister yell “Look out!” when she is about to get hit. This book includes a character whose hearing problem has an impact on the story. A main focus of this book appears to be to teach about the disability of a hearing loss.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every Man Heart Lay Down</td>
<td>Author: Honor</td>
<td>This book is based on the story of the birth of Jesus told in Liberian words and speech patterns. The illustrations also picture the African world.</td>
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<td>-------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Honor, 1971</td>
<td>The disability portrayal in the story is detected in a scene from the ancient world: “Long time past, before them big tree live, before them big tree’s papa live,” according to the text. A tertiary character is walking with a cane around other people doing various activities: people are hunting; others are climbing trees; two carry big water jars on their heads; a child is crawling; there are cattle, and so forth.</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. CSKA = Coretta Scott King Award*
Analysis

We systematically analyzed the CSKA picture books with a qualitative approach with DisCrit as our theoretical base, which helped us look critically at potential multiple marginalizations of people with disabilities in terms of race. We believed that a rich description of characters with disabilities would enable us to critically examine any issues of underrepresentation and misrepresentation. The analysis focused on representational issues, power relations, and inequalities related to ethnic/racial backgrounds and disabilities. We sought to describe how the characters with disabilities in relation to other characters and the plots are portrayed in the text and the illustrations, which was assisted by our use of the Rating Scale for Quality Characterizations of Individuals with Disabilities in Children’s Literature developed by Dyches and Prater (2000), adapted by Pehrson (2011), and readapted by us. This rating scale is organized into seven parts: overall reaction, personal portrayal, social interactions, exemplary practices, sibling relationships, impact of disability on plot, and impact of setting on disability, point of view, and illustrations. Each part consisted of several guiding questions. We used this rating scale to analyze each book. Our analysis based on social interaction questions (e.g., whether the characters with disabilities engaged in socially and emotionally reciprocal relationships, whether the text portrays positive social contributions of the characters with disabilities) was particularly useful for evaluating power relations and inequalities. With regard to illustrations, we understood that colors, characters’ perspectives, and atmosphere would affect the portrayals of power relations (Brittain, 2004). Our analysis also evaluated the texts and illustrations based on the aforementioned concept of cultural specificity (Cai, 2002; Sims Bishop, 1982) in terms of race and disabilities. We evaluated whether the text and illustrations portrayed the unique experience of African/African American people with disabilities, such as lifestyle, linguistic traits, religious beliefs, family relationships, social mores, attitudes, values, behaviors, and perspectives about social injustice related to racism or ableism. For example, when someone is called “the blind man” rather than a person’s name, it unintentionally emphasizes the visual impairment and potentially trivializes the cultural identity of the character, which is disempowering. The disempowering aspect is manifested when other characters are referred to by their given names. Naming is an important instrument that can build cultural specificity (Cai, 2002).

The process of data analysis followed Miles et al.’s (2019) suggestion for qualitative data analysis, treating the CSKA picture books with disability portrayals as the fixed-content data. The analysis began with open coding with a flexible a priori coding system based on the criteria for the authentic portrayals of people with disabilities. For instance, Tenets 2 and 4 of DisCrit impacted this initial a priori coding system, which made us look for various dimensions of identities and troubles such as class, gender, age, health, as well as race and disability and seek to find authentic voices of African/African American people with disabilities. In addition, based on disability studies scholars’ suggestions, we investigated whether the CSKA books emphasize similarities or differences between people with disabilities and people without disabilities, as disability studies focuses on promoting empathy toward people with disabilities. Open coding based on this initial a priori coding system yielded 74 codes. The unit of analysis was a sentence for the text and a scene for the illustrations. There could be multiple scenes in one page, and some scenes were spread across two pages from the verso page to the recto page. During grouping those codes from open coding, seven codes emerged from the 74 initial codes as higher categories. Then we proceeded to axial coding and selective coding, in looking
for the emerging themes. Fourteen categories were developed in the grouping process in axial coding. These categories were regrouped into four themes: disability portrayal, identities, power relations, and promoting empathy. In selective coding, these categories were integrated into a coherent narrative under three subsections of the findings. Codes under power relations and identities were discussed together in one section: representational issues. Then the other two themes became independent sections.

Findings

This section describes the 13 CSKA picture books identified by the first screening as presenting characters with disabilities and discusses disability portrayals in terms of issues of othering, representation, and power relations. Table 2 displays the list of books with descriptive information about each. A total of 16 characters with disabilities were identified in these 13 books. One character (Harriet Tubman) appeared in two books (Before She Was Harriet and Ashley Bryan’s ABC of African American Poetry). Three books portrayed multiple characters with disabilities (two in Before She Was Harriet; three in Last Stop on Market Street; two in Under the Sunday Tree).

Not Othering but Promoting Empathy: Similarity Rather Than Differences

The CSKA picture books with characters with disabilities did not necessarily focus on their disabilities. Instead, these picture books portrayed abilities, interests, and strengths of characters with disabilities, which can be similar to ones of people without disabilities. Scholars warn that both politicization and aestheticization of disability position disability as cultural otherness, as they focus not on the people but on the disability, which is different from normality (Solis, 2004). The CSKA picture books, by not focusing on disabilities, may prevent readers from positioning disability as cultural otherness and may promote empathy with characters with disabilities. The CSKA picture books depicted struggles that were not related to the disability. For example, the legendary African American emancipator Harriet Tubman appeared in two CSKA picture books: Before She Was Harriet and Ashley Bryan’s ABC of African American Poetry. The main struggles that she dealt with were slavery and social injustice. Although an orthopedic disability could be assumed by readers due to her use of a cane in the illustrations, the story did not mention one. Harriet Tubman in Before She Was Harriet was a realistically depicted, fully developed, self-directed, and determined character who did not put her disability on display. The portrayal of the disability in the text was very brief, using only a few words (e.g., “broke her back”) to indicate her potential disability. Other sources confirm Harriet Tubman had epilepsy or a brain injury (Rousso, 2001; Swanson, 2016), but readers of Before She Was Harriet may not notice Harriet’s long-term disability only from the text and the illustrations. In relation to her social interactions, her story portrays the positive social contributions of people with disabilities and promotes respect for them. She worked tirelessly, using her hands, voice, and intellect to make a difference. In another depiction of Harriet Tubman, in Ashley Bryan’s ABC of African American Poetry, her disability was not obvious in the text, similar to Before She Was Harriet. Whereas the text did not portray Harriet with a disability, in the illustration she is using a cane, which implies she may have had an orthopedic disability. The illustration shows people escaping slavery being led by Harriet Tubman. Similar to her portrayal in Before She Was Harri-
Table 2

Descriptive Information of CSKA picture books with character(s) with disability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Award year</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Illustrator</th>
<th>Setting: time</th>
<th>Setting: place</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Character(s) with disability</th>
<th>Character significance level</th>
<th>Disability type</th>
<th>African/African American identities detected</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Early childhood character with disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Before She Was Harriet</em></td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Lesa Cline-Ransome</td>
<td>James E. Ransome</td>
<td>Past</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Biography</td>
<td>Harriet Tubman</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Orthopedic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>In Plain Sight</em></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Richard Jackson</td>
<td>Jerry Pinkney</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Realistic fiction</td>
<td>Grandpa</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Orthopedic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Last Stop on Market Street</em></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Matt de la Peña</td>
<td>Christian Robinson</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Realistic fiction</td>
<td>Character who is blind</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Visual</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ellen's Broom</em></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Kelly Starling Lyons</td>
<td>Daniel Minter</td>
<td>Past</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Historical fiction</td>
<td>Character in a wheelchair</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>Orthopedic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bird</em></td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Zetta Elliott</td>
<td>Shadra Strickland</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Realistic fiction</td>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Young adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Author 1</td>
<td>Author 2</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>Author 3</td>
<td>Author 4</td>
<td>Tertiary Level</td>
<td>Disability Type</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age Group</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Ashley Bryan’s ABC of African American Poetry</em></td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Ashley Bryan</td>
<td>Ashley Bryan</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td>Harriet Tubman</td>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Orthopedic</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Singing Man: Adapted From a West African Folktale</em></td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Angela Shelf Medearis</td>
<td>Terea Shaffer</td>
<td>West Africa</td>
<td>Folktale</td>
<td>Sholo</td>
<td></td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Visual</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Talking Eggs</em></td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Robert San Souci</td>
<td>Jerry Pinkney</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Folktale</td>
<td>The old woman</td>
<td></td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Orthopedic</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Under the Sunday Tree</em></td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Eloise Greenfield</td>
<td>Amos Ferguson</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td>Character with a cane in the illustration</td>
<td>Character with a cane in the illustration</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Orthopedic</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Illustrator(s)</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age Range</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Patchwork Quilt</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Valerie Flournoy</td>
<td>Jerry Pinkney</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Realistic fiction</td>
<td>Grandma</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Immobility (unknown cause)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Have a Sister—My Sister Is Deaf</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Jeanne W. Peterson</td>
<td>Deborah Kogan Ray</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Realistic fiction</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Auditory</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Early childhood character with disability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every Man Heart Lay Down</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Lorenz Graham</td>
<td>Colleen Browning</td>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>Folktale</td>
<td>Character with a cane in the illustration</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>Orthopedic</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
et, this poem and illustration exhibit the positive social contributions of a person with a disability and promote respect for her regardless of the disability.

Disability is not the main topic in In Plain Sight, similar to Before She Was Harriet and Ashley Bryan’s ABC of African American Poetry. One might assume that the grandfather in In Plain Sight uses a wheelchair due to his orthopedic disability, although the text does not mention his disability at all. The entire story is set in the family’s house and does not show the grandfather’s social life beyond his family. However, it surely depicts him, regardless of his disability, engaging in a socially and emotionally reciprocal relationship with Sophie. The Patchwork Quilt displays a similar theme and disability portrayal as In Plain Sight. Tanya’s grandma’s illness in The Patchwork Quilt, although it is not fully explained in the story, puts her on bed rest and forestalls her quilting for about 6 months. When she wants to look outside to enjoy the sunlight, Tanya’s father needs to carry Grandma to her chair by the window. She finishes the quilt sitting in her chair. She is never portrayed or mentioned as walking in the book, which could imply she has orthopedic disabilities. The entire story is set in the family’s house. Readers cannot see Grandma engaging in social activities other than familial interactions. However, she is still shown watching over Tanya’s quilting and engaging in a reciprocal relationship with her granddaughter.

In Ellington Was Not a Street, W. E. B. Du Bois, a prominent historian, sociologist, writer, and the first African American to receive a doctorate from Harvard University, is shown using a cane and being assisted by the author’s father when he is walking up the stairs. The next scene shows Du Bois and the author’s father in conversation on a couch, holding cups of coffee. The text reads, “[Du Bois] hummed some tune over me sleeping in the company of men who changed the world.” While the significance of Du Bois’s work is not fully unpacked, as one of the “men who changed the world,” it is shown that people with disabilities can make positive social contributions and are worthy of respect.

In The Singing Man: Adapted From a West African Folk tale, although Sholo is blind, he teaches Banzar everything he needs to know about music and how to make a living from performing. Sholo does not allow his physical disability to inhibit him from teaching Banzar. This book portrays the characteristics of the disabilities realistically. It does not portray the disabilities only, but also the abilities, interests, and strengths of the character. Sholo’s social contributions through his music and his teaching are shared in a positive light.

The tertiary characters with (potential) disabilities in the illustrations of the CSKA picture books are depicted to engage in activities that people without disabilities would engage in, which can still promote empathy. Disability portrayal in Ellen’s Broom is detected in the first scene at the church where Ellen’s family and other African American people are worshiping. In this scene, a tertiary character is holding a cane and worshiping. Although the senior citizen with the cane is not mentioned in the text, the character is depicted as someone with a disability who is fully participating in the church service. Similarly, although the tertiary character with a cane in Every Man Heart Lay Down is not mentioned in the text and we do not know much about him, one thing is sure: He is not isolated, but surrounded by people in a social environment. In an illustration for a poem titled “That Kind of Day” in Under the Sunday Tree, two people are holding canes, indicating potential orthopedic disabilities. Two other people in the scene appear
to be the children of the family. The poem describes nice weather: “It’s that kind of day and that kind of season when the breeze is sweet and the cool air calls come out.” The four people seem to be walking or doing chores outside the house. The painting portrays the interests/experiences of characters with disabilities (e.g., enjoying a beautiful day outside), which may not be too different from those of people without disabilities.

**Representational Issues: Underrepresentation or Misrepresentation**

This section reports the issues of underrepresentation and misrepresentation found in the 13 CSKA picture books, because both issues are significant in children’s literature research (Cai, 2002).

**Results From Underrepresentation Analysis in Terms of Disability and Race/Ethnicity**

Among the 16 characters with disabilities found in the 13 CSKA picture books, 13 were African/African American. Only five of 16 characters with disabilities were female (31.3%). In terms of disability types, among the 13 African/African American characters with disabilities, 10 had orthopedic disabilities (76.9%), two had visual disabilities (15.4%), one had an emotional disturbance (7.7%), and one had cause-unknown immobility (7.7%). This trend is found to be different from what is discovered in the statistics from the U.S. Department of Education (2018). The most frequently served disability types among children ages 3–5 in the United States in the fall of 2016 were speech or language impairment, developmental delays, and autism. The same report also revealed that among African American students ages 6–21 in that same period, the three most frequently served disability types were specific learning disability (40.4%), other health impairment (15.1%), and speech or language impairment (12.8%). None of the three actual most frequently served disability types among African American students in the fall of 2016 were portrayed in CSKA books.

African/African American cultural specificity was rarely pronounced in the CSKA picture books with disability portrayals. For instance, race is not explicitly spoken of in *Last Stop on Market Street*, although readers can see CJ’s skin color is dark. This book does not speak explicitly about the reasons for CJ and his grandma’s current economic condition, either. The racial background of the blind man is not specified. His skin color is lighter than the other characters in the book, which leads us to assume that he is White. In addition, there are two tertiary characters in wheelchairs in the illustrations, although they are not mentioned in the text. One of them is displayed on the last page with somewhat dark skin. He is eating his soup in the kitchen where Nana and CJ are serving the people. The other character in a wheelchair has light skin and is featured on a street. Similar to *Last Stop on Market Street*, African/African American cultural specificity is not pronounced in *I Have a Sister—My Sister Is Deaf*. The racial identity of the deaf sister is not explicitly declared in the text. However, in the black-and-white illustrations, the child, her mother, and her older sister appear to be Asian or Asian American. Asian or Asian American cultural aspects are not portrayed.

In the first scene of *Ellen’s Broom*, Ellen’s family and other African Americans are worshiping. From the onset, the story is contextualized to illustrate African Americans’ liberation to worship. The text states, “[Ellen’s] people no longer had to worship at
the back of the master’s church or sneak to the woods for prayer meetings. Slavery days were over. They had so much to be thankful for.”

_Last Stop on Market Street_ speaks about the Blind culture (capitalized to indicate that a character in this book belongs to the Blind culture, not just that he does not see). Another rider on the bus is blind. The text portrays “the blind man” accurately and respectfully according to the current APA guidelines. When CJ sees the man, he asks his grandma, “How come that man can’t see?” CJ’s grandma shares that the Blind culture has a rich appreciation of their world due to their enhanced olfactory and auditory senses. For example, the blind man mentions he feels the music better when his eyes are closed.

**Results From Misrepresentation Analysis in Terms of Disability and Race/Ethnicity**

Although the texts of these books do not use any labels specific to IDEA, disabilities depicted in the text or illustrations are realistic and not inaccurate. Even in folktales such as _The Talking Eggs_ and _Every Man Heart Lay Down_, miraculous cures for disabilities are not detected. Most of the characters with disabilities are developed, not necessarily deeply but adequately, considering the limited page numbers of standard picture books.

The characters with disabilities in the CSKA picture books are not portrayed as helpless people who are just being cared for. They are portrayed to care for and assist others. Sophie’s grandpa of _In Plain Sight_ is not always being cared for, but cares for Sophie as well. Tanya’s grandma in _The Patchwork Quilt_ watches over Tanya’s quilting—not always being cared for by others. Different from Tanya’s grandma or Sophie’s grandpa, the witch-like old woman character in _The Talking Eggs_ is surreal. For example, she takes off her head and sets it on her knees to comb her hair. Her place is filled with magical things like a cow with two heads, and she makes one grain turn into a large pile of rice. However, the story does not use a magical cure on her orthopedic disabilities. She engages emotionally in reciprocal social relationships. She is not always being cared for. Although Blanche does some chores for her, she teaches Blanche and helps her escape domestic abuse.

As far as how the disabilities affect the plots, most of the main characters with disabilities in the CSKA picture books display appropriate character growth throughout the stories (e.g., Harriet Tubman in _Before She Was Harriet_; Grandpa in _In Plain Sight_; Grandma in _The Patchwork Quilt_). They are not stagnant, but learn, change, and grow as a result of their life experiences. They are unchanged with respect to their physical condition, which means that the stories do not focus on the cure of their disabilities.

_Last Stop on Market Street_, although it does not portray much growth or change of the blind character as he only appears once in a scene, still provides an acceptable example of the social interactions of people with disabilities. The blind character rides the bus independently and engages in conversations with others. Along with his words to CJ’s grandma about appreciating music, his actions exemplify the positive social contributions of people with disabilities.
Emotional disturbances such as drug addiction and depression can be difficult topics of discussion in a children’s picture book, but the unfortunate reality is that young children are exposed to these circumstances, and Bird’s story helps them cognize these issues. The demonstrations of love found in Bird can help young children in similar situations know that love can still be shared among family members, even in the midst of struggles with addiction and mental illness. Mehkai’s first person narration eases the heaviness somewhat. Whereas most of the other illustrations by the highly talented, award-winning illustrator are detailed, the illustrations for the difficult scenes are poetically or vaguely depicted, which softens the rough situation. For example, in an illustration of Marcus using drugs on the roof, it is really hard to tell what he is doing. In the text, Mehkai states that Marcus is not watching the birds with him. Instead, he says Marcus held his hand around his mouth and looked downward. According to Mehkai’s description, Marcus went up on the roof because of his emotional disturbance: “His face would be all tight and angry when he left, but when he came back downstairs, Marcus would be chill… I never asked him why his eyes were so red.” Although Mehkai does not understand Marcus’s behavior, he describes it quite realistically. Bird portrays Marcus’s abilities, interests, and strengths, as well as his disability: “Marcus was real good at art. He was the one who taught me [Mehkai] how to draw.” Marcus is proud of his art, although his grandfather calls it garbage graffiti. Marcus’s social interactions other than with Mehkai are rarely mentioned. He dropped out of school. He spends most of his time in a dark bedroom, “curled up on his bed, shaking and sweating.” Mehkai experiences a wide range of emotional reactions, neither all positive nor all negative (e.g., joy, pride, love, isolation, anger, frustration, sadness), from his sibling relationship with Marcus. He does not seem to be fully aware of the nature of Marcus’s depression and addiction, but he gradually understands more over time.

Another CSKA picture book is also written from a sibling’s point of view. The description of the deaf sister’s lived experiences in I Have a Sister—My Sister Is Deaf is realistic, portraying her interactions with her mother, big sister, and schoolmates. The narrator shows insight into her deaf sister’s emotions. Her answer to the question whether it hurt to be deaf is “Her ears don’t hurt, but her feelings do when people do not understand.” This insight seems to have been cultivated by opportunities for growth that are not typical for the siblings of children without disabilities.

Power Relations

Among the CSKA picture books with disability portrayals, 10 portrayed characters with disabilities whose presence significantly impacted the stories: Before She Was Harriet, In Plain Sight, Last Stop on Market Street, Bird, Ellington Was Not a Street, Ashley Bryan’s ABC of African American Poetry, The Singing Man: Adapted From a West African Folktale, The Talking Eggs, The Patchwork Quilt, and I Have a Sister—My Sister Is Deaf. Regarding the characters’ social interactions, these books generally depict the characters with disabilities engaging in not subordinate but reciprocal relationships with other characters. Most of the main characters with a disability in these books are shown to be involved with others or their families, at work, recreation, or leisure. Although Bird’s brother Marcus, who is emotionally disturbed and addicted to drugs and is not depicted with positive social relationships, Bird still has some positive memories of Marcus.
In addition, tertiary characters with disabilities in four books (Last Stop on Market Street, Ellen’s Broom, Under the Sunday Tree, and Every Man Heart Lay Down) were still generally portrayed to be independent and active in social settings.

In The Singing Man: Adapted From a West African Folktale, an elderly blind musician called Sholo sings songs he composed to honor the chiefs and their ancestors “for a few coins.” The story does not explain how much “a few coins” is worth. Even when Banzar is leaving the family for good, his father gives him only a few coins. It is possible that “a few coins” are much more valuable than a few U.S. quarters today. Still, Banzar’s coins do not have much purchasing power at the market. According to the author’s notes, though, a praise singer “had a certain power over a king or chief because he could use his songs to either praise or condemn a chief’s actions and decisions.” Sholo teaches Banzar how to play the drums and also about African history. Africans take pride in their ancestral past and impart the knowledge of their history to each new generation. In West Africa, griots or storytellers travel around to villages narrating African history and playing their musical instruments.

Three books that include characters with disabilities whose presence does not impact, or only minimally impacts, the story are Ellen’s Broom, Under the Sunday Tree, and Every Man Heart Lay Down. Last Stop on Market Street includes two tertiary characters in addition to the blind man. These six tertiary characters with disabilities are noticed mainly because they are using canes. These tertiary characters with disabilities do not have names, as they are not mentioned in the text. Among 10 characters whose presence significantly impacts the stories, only five characters had names. The other five characters are just called the blind man, (deaf) sister, grandpa, Tanya’s grandma, and the old woman. Brittain (2004) discussed that no names for characters with disabilities exacerbates the marginalization. Although these CSKA books did not necessarily focus on their disabilities, when a character is called “the blind man” rather than a person’s name, it unintentionally emphasizes the disability. Furthermore, naming is an important instrument that can build cultural specificity of stories (Cai, 2002), an area in which these books were not so successful.

I Have a Sister—My Sister Is Deaf has been criticized for potential marginalization of the deaf sister and an unsuccessful portrayal of deaf culture (Brittain, 2004; Worotynec, 2004). The development of characters and plot is weak, which can make one consider this book as quasi-fictional. The deaf sister does not have a name. It is not the deaf sister but her hearing sister who is the narrator, which does not give the deaf sister a voice. The deaf sister mostly faces sideways rather than looking at the reader. The soft-toned, bland, and colorless illustrations may not appeal to today’s readers in early childhood and exacerbate a potential marginalization of deaf people. Rich aspects of deaf culture are barely portrayed (Brittain, 2004).

Discussion and Implications

In this section, we address the critical issues of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of African/African American people with disabilities in CSKA picture books and children’s literature. We explore specific challenges and themes, discussing their
implications for future research and practice. This discussion offers valuable insights into the intricate interplay of race, disability, and children’s literature.

**Underrepresentation and Misrepresentation of African/African American People With Disabilities**

A limited number of the CSKA picture books with disability portrayals was discovered, as only 13 picture books portrayed 16 characters with disabilities among the 134 picture books from 1971 to 2020. Of these characters, only 13 were African/African American. If all of the characters from the 134 CSKA picture books are counted, the proportion of African/African American characters with disabilities is very low. Taking only three characters from each of the 134 CSKA picture books makes a proportion of 13 African/African American characters with disabilities to 402 total characters, which is only 3.2%.

In terms of gender, only five of the 16 characters with disabilities were female (31.3%). The disproportionate representation of males receiving special education services in U.S. schools is a well-known issue (Judge & Watson, 2011; Sullivan & Bal, 2013), as it has been nearly two to one (U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). If learning disability is teased out, the proportion becomes three to one (Judge & Watson, 2011). Interestingly, this ratio is similar to the gender ratio in the CSKA characters with disabilities. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (2001) investigated this issue by conducting a comprehensive review of the records of students receiving special education services in a school district in one school year, focusing on intellectual disabilities and significant learning disabilities. They were looking for potential gender-based referral bias and concluded that “males are not necessarily overrepresented in the special education population, but instead females who could benefit from special education services are underrepresented” (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001, p. 28). A similar underrepresentation of girls with Autism spectrum disorder was reported by Arms et al. (2008), Gill (2016), Haney (2016), and Rynkiewicz et al. (2016). However, because the disproportionality debate is not conclusive (Cavendish et al., 2020), it has not been determined whether boys are overrepresented or girls are underrepresented in special education. The gender imbalance is still observed in special education and a similar trend is exhibited among the characters with disabilities in the CSKA picture books. As Wilson (2017) suggested with the Disability Studies in Education perspectives, the androcentric diagnosis and the educational environments that are “constructed for a nondisabled, neurotypical, white, male, middle-class norm” (“Abstract”) might feed the imbalance.

Regarding age representation, only one CSKA picture book, *I Have a Sister—My Sister Is Deaf*, portrayed a character with a disability during early childhood. However, the character’s racial identity seems to be Asian/Asian American. If we are concerned only about African/African American representations, then there is no CSKA picture book that portrays a child with a disability during early childhood. It may create distorted views and perpetuate stereotypes among young children when some voices are not included. In addition, among the 13 CSKA books with disability portrayals, only five were realistic fiction books set in the present-day United States (*In Plain Sight, Last Stop on Market Street, Bird, The Patchwork Quilt, and I Have a Sister—My Sister Is Deaf*). More stories with African/African American children with disabilities that are current and realistic should be included in the CSKA picture books, and the body of English-speaking
children’s literature in general, in order for today’s children with disabilities to be able to make personal connections with the stories and for African/African American children without disabilities to learn about the lived experiences of African/African American people with them.

Our analysis also found a disparity in the CSKA picture books between the disability types represented and those prevalent among students in the United States. This disparity denotes that people with certain disabilities such as learning disability, other health impairment, and speech or language impairment are more likely to be underrepresented in CSKA picture books.

The discussion so far has focused on underrepresentation issues regarding African/African American people with disabilities, based not only on race/ethnicity or disabilities but also on disability types, gender, and age. “DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or disability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on” (Annamma et al., 2018, p. 56). Underrepresentation issues relate to the invisibility and marginalization of certain groups of people based not only on race/ethnicity or disability but also on gender, class, age, linguistic background, religion, and sexuality. In addition, because some CSKA picture books did not successfully portray the cultural specificity of African/African American communities or people with disabilities, we suggest that future picture books need to richly describe multidimensional identities and their cultures of African/African American characters with disabilities in texts and illustrations.

Meanwhile, “increased visibility does not always mean increased understanding, prestige, self-esteem, or power” (Kaomea, 2000, p. 341). Marcus in Bird, the African American youth with emotional disturbance and drug issues in a U.S. urban area, made the rough side visible. This type of visibility bears risks of stereotyping and misrepresenting people with these dimensions in their identities. On the other hand, the CSKA picture books with prominent African American figures such as Harriet Tubman and W. E. B. Du Bois do not emphasize their disabilities. Some disability studies scholars (e.g., Solis, 2004) might praise this because the stories focus not on characters’ disabilities but on the characters themselves. On the other hand, Bell (2011) might say their “disability … is relegated to the margins” because “too much critical work in African-American Studies posits the African-American body politic in an ableist (read non-disabled) fashion” (p. 3). In other words, the absence of disability is an implied identity norm, relegating African Americans with disabilities to an implied marginal (e.g., second-class) status. By contrast, an intersectional conception of African American identity would assume that this identity is inherently multidimensional, which includes the fact that African American identity fully includes African Americans and, thus, African American children’s literature characters.

**Implications for Future Research**

We call for more studies about picture books with young African/African American children with disabilities so that we can further develop this line of discussion regarding the issues of representing multidimensional identities in picture books. As a matter of fact, more scholarly works about this topic can draw attention to it and may encourage authors and illustrators to create more picture books with those characters. We need more
quality picture books that respectfully portray fully developed African/African American characters with disabilities that enable readers to understand their multifaceted identities and their cultures. We suggest use of the criteria for authentic portrayals of people with disabilities synthesized and utilized in this study as a useful instrument for researchers and picture book authors for evaluating the portrayals of characters with disabilities.

We also suggest that researchers analyze picture books that have won other awards to discover more picture books with African/African American characters with disabilities and critically unpack their portrayals in terms of intersectionality. For example, future studies of picture books that have won the Schneider Family Book Award, which focuses on disability portrayals, can be significant, considering the general paucity of scholarly works about children’s books that have been awarded the Schneider Family Book Award. Curwood’s (2013) work, the only article that we found, focused on chapter books that target older children or young adults and did not look into multidimensional identities. Thus, the absence of inherently intersectional conceptions of identity is glaring in children’s literature awards programs and needs to be addressed if the programs aim to promote fully substantive representations of life that includes the fact that race and disability are important identity factors.

The current study did a systematic content analysis of the CSKA picture books. While there is merit to systematic content analyses of diverse pools of children’s literature for developing a wider repertoire of children’s books with characters with disabilities, more research studies with children as research participants are called for to know about their perspectives and learning about people with disabilities. Research like Adomat’s (2014) study on how children explore issues of disability through conversations during read-aloud and literature circle discussions is exemplary. As that study showed, the children made positive changes in how they interacted in their classrooms. The children without disabilities displayed increased interactions with the children with disabilities. The children with disabilities participated more actively in book discussions than before. Future studies can look into young readers’ perceptions about the CSKA books that portray characters with disabilities. By doing so, we can know what changes the books with African/African American characters with disability portrayals can make among children. In addition, researchers can learn from young readers’ critical views, as Adomat found. Some books with awards and with quite positive portrayals used in Adomat’s study still had issues, stereotypes, and negative images found by the children.

Implications for Practice

This line of research can help expose teachers to picture books that portray African/African American people with disabilities and may help inform their instruction regarding how to incorporate culturally relevant and responsive picture books, which can eventually improve students’ literacy development (Robinson, 2020). Although not all CSKA picture books with portrayals of African/African American people with disabilities detected in this research are perfect in terms of ideal representation, teachers can use the books in Table 1 as the beginning point. Teachers who either identify themselves as African/African American people with disabilities or teach students who identify as such can carefully examine the picture books listed in this article, using their critical lenses. They can give their students opportunities to critically investigate these picture books. This approach can increase possibilities to facilitate future authorships among the students, who will create
more picture books with better representations of African/African American people with disabilities. We suggest that reading illustration be an essential part of classroom activities. Robinson (2020) pointed out that students can learn to make inferences using details in the content and illustrations and to build academic language, providing useful prompts. Among the prompts provided by Robinson, some can be helpful in detecting misrepresentation issues: “Which aspect of the illustration most quickly captures my attention?”, “How does seeing these illustrations make me feel?,” and “What actions might I take in response to these messages?” (p. 29). As a matter of fact, these suggested prompts are more suitable for older children, as Robinson’s work addressed how to read illustrations in graphic novels for African American boys with reading disabilities. They can be tweaked to be used with younger children in early childhood to read picture books with portrayals of African/African American people with disabilities. Research has found that special education teachers perceived their teacher education programs as not effective in terms of addressing diversity (Chu & Garcia, 2014). In addition, although general education teachers tend to lack collaborations with special education teachers and lack knowledge of students of color with disabilities, they become more sensitive about culturally responsive teaching and important characteristics such as gender identity, family structure, parenthood, religious practices, and language (Reddig et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2012). More teaching methods and materials regarding African/African American people with disabilities and with diverse characteristics need to be developed for improving teacher education in general to eventually better serve African/African American children with disabilities.

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Children’s Literature Analyzed


